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BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5765
JULIAN K. GORSKI

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THE SOVIET UNION AND NATIONALISM

ANNCR:

RECENT WEEKS HAVE WITNESSED A STRONG PUBLIC SHOW OF ETHNIC PRIDE AMONG THE DIVERSE NATIONALITIES IN THE SOVIET UNION. WITH A BACKGROUND REPORT HERE IS VOA'S JULIAN GORSKI:

VOICE:

ETHNIC PROBLEMS IN THE SOVIET UNION GO BACK MANY YEARS. THE CZARS TRIED TO COPE WITH THEM FOR CENTURIES WITHOUT MUCH SUCCESS. IN MODERN TIMES, WHEN LENIN ROSE TO POWER, HE TRIED TO MOLLIFY MINORITY DEMANDS FOR ETHNIC RECOGNITION BY PLEDGING TO RESPECT THEIR RIGHTS, BUT 70 YEARS LATER NATIONALISM IS STILL EVIDENT IN THE FABRIC OF SOVIET SOCIETY.

THE LATEST EVIDENCE COMES FROM AS FAR REMOVED CORNERS OF THE SOVIET STATE AS ESTONIA IN THE NORTHWEST AND AZERBAIJAN ON THE WESTERN SHORES OF THE CASPIAN SEA. AT THE SAME TIME THE ARMENIANS AND THE GEORGIANS ARE ALSO MANIFESTING THEIR NATIONAL LOYALTIES.

AS WESTERN OBSERVERS SEE IT, THE ONE COMMON DENOMINATOR IN THE UPSURGE OF ETHNIC FEELINGS IS THE LANGUAGE QUESTION -- THE FEAR THAT SOVIET LEADERS ARE PURSUING THE CZARIST PATH OF "RUSSIFICATION" FOR THE PURPOSE OF OBLITERATING NATIONAL TRAITS.

IN THE GEORGIAN CAPITAL OF TBILISI EARLIER THIS MONTH, SEVERAL HUNDRED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SOME FACULTY MEMBERS REPORTEDLY MARCHED ON THE SOVIET REPUBLIC'S PARLIAMENT BUILDING DEMANDING REJECTION OF A CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE -- PROPOSED BY MOSCOW -- THAT WOULD REVOKE THE OFFICIAL STATUS OF THE GEORGIAN LANGUAGE. THE GEORGIAN NEWSPAPER, "ZARYA VOSTOKA," MADE NO MENTION OF THE DEMONSTRATION BUT THE PAPER QUOTED THE

SOVIET PROVINCE'S COMMUNIST PARTY CHIEF, EDUARD SHEVARNADZE, AS SAYING THE CHANGE WOULD NOT TAKE PLACE. ACCORDING TO ZARYA VOSTOKA", MR. SHEVARNADZE SAID THE COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP FOUND IT "EXPEDIENT" TO ABIDE BY THE OLD CONSTITUTION, WHICH PROCLAIMS GEORGIAN THE STATE LANGUAGE.

DETAILS OF THE DISTURBANCES IN TBILISI ARE SCANTY. HOWEVER, WESTERN TRAVELLERS REPORT SEEING ANTI-RIOT UNITS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY AND SAY THAT CIVIL AIR TRAVEL TO AND FROM TBILISI WAS SUSPENDED FOR TWO DAYS.

THE NEWS FROM GEORGIA WAS FOLLOWED BY REPORTS FROM NEIGHBORING SOVIET ARMENIA THAT LOCAL AUTHORITIES ALSO REJECTED MOVES TO DOWNGRADE THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE. THERE ARE UNCONFIRMED REPORTS OF DEMONSTRATIONS BY ARMENIAN YOUTHS PROTESTING THE CHANGE. THE OFFICIAL NEWS MEDIA REPORTED ONLY THAT "THE STATE LANGUAGE OF THE ARMENIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC IS THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE."

MUCH THE SAME STORY IS REPORTED FROM BAKU, THE CAPITAL OF THE OIL-RICH AZERBAIJAN REPUBLIC. A SPOKESMAN FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNIST PARTY DAILY, "BABINSKY RABOCHY," SAID A NEWLY-APPROVED TEXT OF THE CONSTITUTION WAS BEING AMENDED TO RETAIN THE CLAUSE STATING THAT THE LOCAL LANGUAGE WOULD CONTINUE TO BE USED IN STATE OFFICES AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

MEANWHILE, A WESTERN JOURNALIST WHO RECENTLY VISITED TALLINN, THE CAPITAL OF ESTONIA, REPORTS THAT THE ESTONIANS HAVE OPENLY DEMONSTRATED THEIR ATTACHMENT TO THEIR WESTERN HERITAGE. AMONG OTHER THINGS ESTONIAN-LANGUAGE SCHOOLS ARE VASTLY PREFERRED OVER RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE CENTERS OF LEARNING.

WESTERN OBSERVERS SEE THE MINORITIES PROBLEM GROWING IN SIGNIFICANCE COMMENSURATE WITH THE GROWTH OF THE ETHNIC POPULATION IN THE SOVIET UNION, WHICH NOW FALLS ONLY SLIGHTLY

BELOW THAT OF THE RUSSIANS. IT'S ALSO BELIEVED THAT THE 1975 HELSINKI DECLARATION ON CIVIL RIGHTS -- SIGNED BY THE SOVIET UNION AND 34 OTHER STATES -- HAS INCREASED ETHNIC DESIRES FOR FREE EXPRESSION. SPEAKING RECENTLY IN WASHINGTON, EXILED FORMER SOVIET GENERAL PYOTR GRIGORENKO SAID CIVIL RIGHTS ADVOCATES IN VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE 15 SOVIET REPUBLICS MONITOR MOSCOW'S COMPLIANCE WITH THE HELSINKI ACCORDS, WHICH PLEDGES SIGNATORY GOVERNMENTS TO RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF MINORITIES AND TO PROTECT THEIR LEGITIMATE INTERESTS.

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